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ABSTRACT

Findings of a national survey of educational committee chairs to identify and rank the top five issues in education are summarized in this report. The top five issues, in order of importance, are the following: K-12 school finance; accountabilty; at-risk youth; higher education finance; and early childhood education. Effectiveness is identified as the educational theme for 1989, with a focus on the increasing importance of accountability, at-risk programs, and funding of higher education. One table denoting the rankings of the top issues by state for 1989 is included. (LMI)

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EMERGING ISSUES: A SURVEY OF EDUCATION COMMITTEE CHAIRS

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EMERGING ISSUES: A SURVEY OF EDUCATION COMMITTEE CHAIRS

INTRODUCTION

The last five years have witnessed a change in the way Americans view education. Concern that the declining quality of education is producing unacceptably low student test scores, high dropout rates, and young people unprepared for the job market has prompted a re-examination of the education system. The public has charged legislators with ensuring that their top budget item--education--produces desired results.

For the past several years the education program of the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL) has conducted a survey of education committee chairs to determine which education topics are emerging as the most significant issues during the most recent and upcoming sessions. In preceding years, the survey has repeatedly identified the same top issues: school finance, teachers and teaching, and governance. However, the results of this year's survey were different. While K-12 finance remained the top issue for both 1988 and 1989, accountability and youth at risk of dropping out of school emerged as the second and third top-rated issues for 1989. Teaching and governance remained high priorities during 1988, but slipped to considerably lower rankings for 1989.

Since most roads in education lead to funding, school finance will probably remain the top legislative education issue every year. That accountability and at-risk youth emerged as more important issues for 1989 than teaching and governance reflects a change in national education priorities. There is more emphasis on student-centered issues and the need for educational improvements.

This year's survey instrument was designed differently than those in previous years. Rather than asking education committee chairs to identify the top three education issues which their legislatures would consider in 1989, our survey listed major issues of education legislation and asked chairs to identify the top five issues, ranking them in order of importance. Respondents were then asked to describe the aspects of each of the five issues about which they were concerned; for example, if school finance were the top issue, finance formula and tax increases would be two aspects. Final determination of issue importance was based upon weighted rankings assigned to each major issue area. Due to 1988 elections, some chair appointments were uncertain at the time of our survey, and therefore we did not receive responses from all states and commonwealths.

K-12 SCHOOL FINANCE: THE TOP ISSUE

In most cases, funding for education is the largest single expenditure of state governments. It follows that securing adequate resources, whether for general purposes or specific programs, and deciding how best to allocate those funds, is the top education priority of legislatures. Of the 87 chairs responding to the survey, 72 said that financing education will be their main challenge in 1989, and most of the remaining chairs identified it among the other top four concerns. Financing education is also a priority for legislative fiscal staff. According to a 1988 NCSL survey of legislative fiscal staff, education was the leading fiscal issue for 1988 and will remain the top issue in 1989.

In 1989 the balances in many state general funds will shrink, and about 25 states will face serious fiscal problems. Regional economic problems are certain to add to financial constraints as legislators try to balance budgets. In most legislatures, money allocated for education spending in the 1990 school year will be carefully scrutinized and the battle for specific program funds will be hard fought.

California voters chose an unusual approach to their education finance dilemma by passing Proposition 98 in November 1988. The proposition guarantees education a set percentage of the state's budget in future years, assuring public schools hundreds of millions more in revenues in 1989. Other states will be closely monitoring the success of California's proposition, wondering if it would offer a solution to their school finance problems.

Finance Formula. Since the finance formula is the key to determining how state money is distributed to districts for all educational costs, the formula was the most frequently mentioned aspect of funding that chairs expect to discuss in 1989: 48 said it was a priority for 1989, and many also listed it for 1988. Many states have re-examined their formulas because of inequities in the dispersement of state aid to school districts. Some states are under court order to do so. In Kentucky, Montana and Texas financing of public education has been declared unconstitutional and these states must find a way to equalize funding. In order to look at the equalization factor in its formula, Arizona may hold a special session in 1989, while Georgia expects to evaluate the funding weights in their formula and Iowa legislators will attempt to rewrite their school finance formula in an effort to equalize funding between school districts with similar enrollments.

Funding Sources. Determining who will pay for education and balancing the state/local share of funding are functions of legislatures. Twenty-five chairs expect to address changes in funding sources in 1989; few identified this as a priority in 1988. Some legislatures will attempt to shift more of the burden of funding education from the local to the state level. Again, this may be done to allow the state to stabilize equity betweeen district spending or to de-emphasize local property tax reliance. The survey indicated that Nevada may be evaluating current state and local revenue sources, along with necessary funding to reduce pupil-teacher ratios, and Louisiana will look at increasing costs and reducing state support for non-instructional costs, continuing the development of a governor-sponsored revised funding formula passed during the 1988 session.

Tax Changes. According to 21 chairs, debating changes in property taxes and/or examining state tax rate procedures will be a priority in 1989. Although there was little indication of actual proposed tax increases, most chairs stated the need to re-assess taxing measures as an essential tool in studying education finance changes. Ohio expects to examine income tax support for schools, Oregon may review districts' tax bases, and Minnesota may discuss the ability of districts to raise revenues, particularly regarding debt service and excess levies. Kentucky, faced with declining school revenues, could consider an unmined mineral tax and increased local funding support.

Other Finance Issues. Changes in local sources of revenue for schools will be addressed in several legislatures in 1989, according to 11 chairs. Ohio expects to debate restructuring the local property tax formula, while Georgia, interested in changing the use of property tax as a major source of funding, may look at alternative sources of local efforts.

Innovative funding was mentioned by nine chairs as an important aspect of school finance to be addressed in 1989. Oklahoma's formula could be changed to allow for local incentives for millage increases, due to passge of a 1988 law restructuring the property tax system. Utah expects to discuss equalized local incentives, since those in existence will sunset in 1989.

ACCOUNTABILITY: THE SECOND PRIORITY

Legislatures are more concerned than ever about ensuring that America's education system is both effectively educating students and adequately preparing them for the workforce. Legislators are increasingly specifying desired results in areas of student achievement and teacher and school performance. States are devising new ways to assess students and school performance and, in many cases, are tying results to rewards and sanctions. Finances are being linked to school quality and improvement; for example, Connecticut passed legislation in 1988

to distribute state aid to districts based in part on the number of students scoring below the remedial level on the state's mastery tests.

Accountability is hot. The rising interest in the issue is demonstrated in our survey's results: accountability emerged as the second most frequently mentioned priority for the 1989 legislative sessions, with 50 chairs ranking it a top issue. Each year accountability has risen in the ranks of priorities identified by our survey. Legislators will generally be concerned with various aspects in 1989, among them student achievement testing, teacher/school performance, and school standards and accreditation.

Student/Achievement Testing. Twenty-eight chairs expect statewide testing to be a priority in 1989. Statewide student achievement testing is one way to tell how well students are learning in individual schools or districts, to identify those schools that need to improve and to provide rewards for improvements or sanctions for unacceptable performances. For example, in 1989 Texas may consider rewarding school districts for producing demonstrable indicators of quality education programs and student achievement. States often consider statewide test results as necessary tools for gauging what works, what doesn't, and what needs to be fixed. Statewide testing can also be controversial, especially when young students are concerned, but Arizona, for example, passed legislation in 1988 that will *limit* statewide testing for first graders. According to the survey, in 1989 Illinois will also ponder the question of too much testing.

Other K-12 Measures. States also look to measuring teacher and school performance as ways of accounting for educational effectiveness: 23 chairs ranked this as a top issue for 1989. Perhaps the most notable accountability topic in 1988 was the New Jersey "Academic Bankruptcy" case instigated by a 1987 law that allows state officials to seize control of school districts that fail to meet minimum education standards (including academic performance, fiscal management and school facilities) and subsequently run the district for at least five years. The state did take over a school district, but city officials filed suit to challenge the takeover, and intervention has subsequently been postponed. The case is pending as of January 1989. This is but one illustration of how serious states are about monitoring their system's success.

In 1989 Texas expects to consider rewarding school districts for producing demonstrable indicators of quality education programs and improvements in student achievement scores. Other aspects of accountability for 1989 listed by the chairs include re-examining school standards and financial program audits. Oklahoma, for example, will specifically examine how funds are being spent in certain subject areas at various grade levels and the corresponding quality of student outcomes. In response to this concern, legislators passed a law in 1988 that provided for a uniform and therefore more accountable Program Cost Accounting System for all public school districts.

Higher Education Accountability. Although slower to gain momentum at the higher education level than at the K-12 level, states are also beginning to monitor the success of programs at state colleges and universities. Eight chairs listed this as a priority in 1989, whereas one chair listed it for 1988. Texas expects to begin institution-wide student testing in the fall of 1989. Florida will consider establishing procedures for tracking and assessing the impact of funds earmarked for higher education, and Illinois may examine the use of teacher assistants rather than faculty.

AT-RISK YOUTH: A MONUMENTAL CONCERN

Since the undereducated often become the unemployed, the large population of students at risk of dropping out of school is alarming, and in essence, places America's economy at risk. While accountability measures are designed to ensure that all students are well educated, programs for at-risk youth are designed to meet a myriad of needs of specific student populations. In the past few years, legislators have addressed the needs of at-risk students in

many ways, among them: mandating statewide dropout data collection and programs, funding at-risk pilot projects and improving job training programs.

At-risk youth emerged in this year's survey as the third most important legislative issue for 1989, receiving top rankings from 52 chairs. This is a significant increase from the ranking of sixth most important during the 1988 session and lower rankings from previous year's surveys. The issue of at-risk students has emerged as a nationally acknowledged problem, mainly because of the growing minority student population that constitutes a large percentage of the at-risk population, the large percentage of children who live in poverty and the increasing rate of teen pregnancy. Legislators are exploring many avenues designed to pave the way for the educational success of these students.

The majority of chairs (33) expect to look at designing pilot projects for at-risk youth in 1989 either as a way to provide incentives to keep students in school or to retrieve those who have already dropped out. Pilot projects allow states to test programs for success with a limited amount of funding, and often with lenient guidelines, allowing for experimentation with educational resources and student learning. In 1989 Tennessee will consider implementing programs that provide counseling and homework assistance in a group home setting to students who are pregnant or already parents. Legislators in Oklahoma may create pilot projects, targeting junior high school students, to improve retention of potential dropouts and to increase interagency cooperation.

States will also be looking at ways to prevent students from dropping out by involving parents in their children's educations. Parental involvement efforts range from programs to educate parents about how to help their children with their schooling, to involving parents in school governing councils. Seventeen chairs listed this issue as a priority for 1989; in surveys of past years, it was rarely mentioned. The increasing interest may be attributed to research that shows vast improvement in student progress, especially at very early ages, when parents are actively involved in the education of their children. Examples of programs designed to encourage parental involvement in 1989 include Indiana's upcoming advertisement campaign stressing parental involvement, and the possibility in Ohio, where legislators will discuss ways to increase parental involvement in unstable families, of developing a foster family program.

HIGHER EDUCATION FINANCE: THE FOURTH ISSUE

Financing higher education is also a major responsibility of state legislatures. According to 41 chairs, it will be the fifth most important issue in 1989, while it was rated as the third top issue in 1988. For most states, allocating overall funding for state higher education institutions will be the major challenge. Generating revenues, funding particular programs, paying faculty salaries and student financial aid will also be addressed during 1989.

Louisiana provides an example of higher education funding issue areas expected to be considered during 1989. Legislators there will study the current formula used for funding state colleges and universities. The state's institutions of higher education are looking for increased funding after recent budget cuts. Due to a controversial change in the budget formula initiated by the State Board of Regents, Oklahoma legislators will look at the overall funding of their state's higher education institutions. Rapidly increasing tuition and an insufficient expansion of student aid will prompt Illinois to consider proposals to cap tuition or to make aid entitlements in 1989.

In response to escalating college costs, many states have recently considered measures to allow parents to invest early on in savings for their children's tuition. Since 1986, 15 states have passed college savings bills (most of which involve the sale of state and local tax-free bonds) and nine states have passed tuition prepayment plans. Legislation has been introduced in many other states, leaving only a few that have not yet addressed this issue, but six chairmen say it will be a priority for them in 1989.

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION: INCREASING IMPORTANCE EACH YEAR

Early childhood education (ECE) programs for children ages five and under have been moving up on the significant issues list in recent years and this year's survey show the most marked rise ever: 35 chairs ranked it as a top priority for 1989, making it the fifth most important issue, while it was only the eighth priority in 1988. In previous surveys ECE was very rarely mentioned.

ECE can be instrumental in offsetting the risks faced by disadvantaged children, putting them on the road to success at an early age. Legislative awareness of this issue has resulted in more funds for more ECE programs every year. Pilot projects for young children at risk were most frequently mentioned as ways to implement such programs in 1989; parental involvement and school-based child care will also be considered.

Some pilot approaches expected to be considered in 1989 include Iowa's, which may include nutrition and medical assistance as well as the possibility of full-day kindergarten, and Delaware's, which will review pilot programs for four-year-olds.

State legislatures have recently developed an interest in school-based child care, allowing schools to use available space for child care before and after school. Schools can offer accessible, affordable child care to parents while also allowing for extended education. State initiatives in this area have varied: some have provided grants to allow schools to contract with private day care providers, others have allowed the schools to run their own extended care programs. In 1989 New Hampshire legislators will be facing the question of whether school-based child care should be paid for by the state or through private funds, while in Pennsylvania legislators will be considering school-based child care for the children of parents who are students.

THE BEST OF THE REST

Education Reform. Monitoring reforms, maintaining the momentum established by previously enacted initiatives, and designing new reforms were listed as priorities in 1989 by 32 chairs. Legislators in Arkansas will tackle the project of monitoring the school reform process, looking at the concern, "It all looks good on paper, but how are things being implemented?"

Teachers and Teaching. Legislators are concerned with improving the teaching profession and ensuring that teachers teach well. To this end, they determine salaries and performance-based pay, training and certification requirements and performance evaluations. Since many legislatures did address the issue in 1988 (it was identified as the second most significant concern last session) it did not receive as high a rating for 1989, with 33 chairs identifying it as a top issue. In 1989, the Connecticut Legislature will debate several issues related to teachers and teaching, including the creation of a teacher standards board, the role of teacher evaluations in the bargaining process, and the possible requirement of professional development for recertification.

Facilities. Construction, rennovation and improvement of educational facilities were cited by 24 chairs as a top issue for 1989. For most legislatures, funding and examining general expenditures will be the main focus in this area. For example, due to a dramatic population growth in some areas of the state in 1989, legislators in Massachusetts will discuss the level of that state's financial commitment for the construction of local school facilities.

Special Education. Special Education continues to receive attention as legislators determine state funding levels, compliance with federal laws and quality of services. Twenty-five chairs said that special education would be a top priority in their state during the 1989 session. One

example is Alaska, where legislators will look at increasing the number of special education teachers in the state in an effort to decrease the pupil/teacher ratio in special education.

CONCLUSION

Effectiveness will be the education theme for 1989. States will try to get the most bang for their buck in education--they want to spend wisely and educate all their students well. This means legislators will be implementing ways to hold schools and educators accountable for producing well educated students. It means that the importance of programs targeting students at risk of dropping out of school, including the very young who are just beginning their education, will be increasingly recognized. And it means that the improvements must extend beyond the elementary and secondary school into institutes of higher education.

TABLE 1

Rankings of Top Issues by State, 1989

▨ Identified as major topic
● Identified as subtopic

	New England						Mideast					Southeast											Great Lakes				
	CT	ME	MA	NH	RI	VT	DE	MD	NJ	NY	PA	AL	AR	FL	GA	KY	LA	MS	NC	SC	TN	VA	WV	IL	IN	MI	OH	WI
FINANCE: K-12	▨	▨	▨			▨	▨		▨	▨	▨	▨	▨	▨	▨	▨	▨	▨	▨	▨	▨		▨	▨	▨	▨	▨	▨
Finance formula	●	●				●				●	●			●	●	●	●	●		●	●		●	●			●	
Changes in funding sources							●			●					●	●	●		●							●	●	●
Tax increases													●		●	●								●			●	●
Local funding incentives																												
Innovative funding																												
Other			●																									
ACCOUNTABILITY			▨			▨		▨	▨	▨	▨	▨	▨	▨	▨	▨		▨						▨	▨	▨	▨	
Student testing/Achievement testing						●				●	●		●	●	●			●						●	●		●	
K-12 accountability						●			●	●		●	●	●	●									●	●	●	●	
Teacher/School performance						●				●	●	●	●	●	●	●		●							●		●	
School standards/Accreditation						●						●	●		●			●							●	●	●	
Financial/Program audits										●				●	●	●											●	
Higher education accountability													●	●										●				
Other																												
AT-RISK YOUTH/DROPOUTS	▨	▨	▨	▨		▨	▨	▨	▨	▨		▨		▨	▨	▨	▨		▨	▨	▨				▨	▨	▨	▨
Pilot projects for specific programs	●	●				●	●		●	●		●		●	●	●				●	●				●	●	●	●
Parental involvement		●				●				●				●	●	●									●		●	●
Statewide mandates				●		●	●							●	●										●		●	●
Job training programs		●				●				●										●					●		●	●
Other	●		●									●			●				●									
FINANCE/HIGHER EDUCATION	▨			▨				▨	▨	▨	▨			▨	▨		▨	▨		▨			▨	▨	▨		▨	▨
Overall funding for state institutes	●										●						●	●		●				●			●	●
Student financial aid programs	●									●	●				●			●						●				●
Other											●							●										
Tuition prepayment plans											●														●		●	●
EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION		▨		▨		▨	▨	▨	▨	▨	▨	▨		▨	▨	▨			▨				▨	▨	▨		▨	▨
Pilot projects		●				●	●		●		●			●	●	●			●								●	
Parental involvement		●								●	●			●		●							●	●	●		●	
School-based child care				●					●	●	●			●		●							●		●		●	●
Other										●									●					●				
Health programs																									●		●	
ECE/Chapter I		●																										

TABLE 1

Rankings of Top Issues by State, 1989

▨ Identified as major topic
● Identified as subtopic

	Plains							Southwest				Rocky Mountains					Far West					
	IA	KS	MN	MO	NB	ND	SD	AZ	NM	OK	TX	CO	ID	MT	UT	WY	AK	CA	HI	NV	OR	WA
FINANCE: K-12	▨	▨	▨	▨		▨	▨	▨	▨	▨	▨	▨		▨	▨	▨	▨	▨		▨	▨	▨
Finance formula	●	●	●	●		●	●	●		●		●		●	●	●	●					
Changes in funding sources							●	●		●				●		●	●			●	●	●
Tax increases				●		●		●				●			●	●				●	●	●
Local funding incentives	●									●										●		●
Innovative funding	●													●	●					●		
Other	●	●							●								●	●				
ACCOUNTABILITY		▨	▨	▨	▨	▨		▨		▨	▨	▨		▨	▨	▨	▨			▨		▨
Student testing/Achievement testing		●				●		●		●	●			●	●		●			●		●
K-12 accountability			●		●			●		●				●	●		●			●		
Teacher/School performance				●	●	●		●		●					●					●		
School standards/Accreditation				●	●	●				●		●		●						●		
Financial/Program audits			●					●								●						
Higher education accountability										●												●
Other																						
AT-RISK YOUTH/DROPOUTS	▨	▨						▨	▨	▨	▨	▨					▨	▨		▨	▨	▨
Pilot projects for specific programs	●							●		●	●									●	●	●
Parental involvement	●							●												●	●	
Statewide mandates	●								●											●		
Job training programs																				●		●
Other		●										●						●				●
FINANCE/HIGHER EDUCATION	▨	▨		▨		▨	▨	▨	▨	▨	▨	▨		▨	▨	▨	▨	▨		▨		▨
Overall funding for state institutes	●	●		●		●	●	●	●	●		●		●	●	●	●			●		●
Student financial aid programs										●								●				●
Other	●	●		●				●							●	●	●					
Tuition prepayment plans																						●
EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION	▨		▨		▨					▨		▨				▨					▨	▨
Pilot projects	●				●					●		●										
Parental involvement	●				●					●	●										●	
School-based child care																						
Other			●													●						●
Health programs	●																				●	
ECE/Chapter I																					●	

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